

VZCZCXYZ0000
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHMO #2561/01 2391337
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 261337Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9701
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHJD/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 002561

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/26/2018
TAGS: PREL PGOV PREF PHUM PINR RS GG
SUBJECT: TFGG01: INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES FINALLY GET ACCESS
TO SOUTH OSSETIA

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor: reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In response to heavy criticism in the Western press about the lack of access by representatives of international humanitarian and human rights groups to South Ossetia, the Russian government relented and allowed the International Committee of the Red Cross, UNHCR and the Council of Europe to visit the conflict zone to speak with those affected by the war and to assess themselves the amount of damage. These visits -- two of them by high ranking officials -- resulted in several exchanges of prisoners, but still no better idea of the number of civilian killed or wounded during the conflict. End Summary.

¶2. (C) A 17-member team from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was the first to arrive in Tskhinvali. They traveled to South Ossetia via North Ossetia on August 20 to conduct a needs assessment with particular emphasis on health, water, sanitation and protection. ICRC president Jakob Kellenberger told reporters in Geneva August 20 after he had returned from a three-day trip to Moscow, Vladikavkaz and Tbilisi, that Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov had approved the visit by seven members of ICRC's international staff and ten members of its local staff. Kellenberger added that this first ICRC team would assess the needs of displaced persons and the state of the medical facilities there, try to restore contact between family members separated by the conflict and visit all those captured or detained in connection with the conflict to assess their treatment and living conditions. Francois Blancy from the ICRC's Moscow office told us August 21 that the team had visited the local hospital and checked on the status of ICRC's office in Tskhinvali. He refused to comment, however, on reports that ethnic Georgians were being pressed into service cleaning rubble from the streets. Tanya Lokshina, a senior researcher from the Moscow office of Human Rights Watch, told us August 22 that she saw several middle-aged ethnic Georgian men clearing the streets during her visit to Tskhinvali the previous week. She added that while they appeared to have been "gang-pressed" into service, they appeared well-fed and had not shared the same fate of others who stayed behind in Georgian villages after the Georgian army retreated.

¶3. (SBU) On August 22, the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres visited Tskhinvali at the end of his four-day mission to Georgia and Russia. He was the first senior international official to travel to South Ossetia after the conflict erupted and UNHCR staff in Moscow told us the visit to Tskhinvali was not confirmed until after Guterres had traveled down to Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia from Moscow. In its official statement concerning the visit, UNHCR took pains to explain that under the current circumstances, the only way to enter South Ossetia was from North Ossetia. Prior to his visit to South Ossetia, Guterres met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow on August 20. The two discussed humanitarian cooperation between UNHCR and the Russian Federation not only broadly, but also specifically relating to the humanitarian response

to the crisis in North and South Ossetia. After arriving in Vladikavkaz on August 21, Gutterres met with Minister for Emergency Situations Sergey Shoigu and the head of Russia's Federal Migration Service Konstantin Romodanovskiy, with whom he visited camps set up for the evacuees from South Ossetia. During his visit to the region, UNHCR announced its office in Vladikavkaz would assist evacuees from South Ossetia and it has reportedly airlifted more than 30 metric tons of relief items to North Ossetia.

¶4. (SBU) On August 24, the Council of Europe's High Commissioner for Human Rights Thomas Hammarberg visited South Ossetia accompanied by Russian Federation Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin. Hammarberg told reporters that he came to Tskhinvali to see what had happened and how individuals' human rights had been violated. During his one-day visit, Hammarberg cast further doubt on the figures for casualties quoted in the Russian media. He said that it was premature to quote an exact number of those killed or injured in the conflict in South Ossetia. The deputy head of the General Staff of the Russian military continued to repeat in his daily press briefings in Moscow the figure of 2,100 dead provided by the local government in South Ossetia, despite the fact the on August 20, the head of the Investigatory Committee of the Russian Prosecutor General stated that 133 South Ossetian civilians died during the fighting. While in Tskhinvali, Hammarberg facilitated the exchange of 17 prisoners on the evening of August 24. After his visit to North and South Ossetia, Hammarberg planned to travel to Georgia, after which he promised reporters he would prepare a report with his findings.

Comment

¶5. (SBU) All three organizations granted access to South Ossetia were careful not to make any statements that would offend their "hosts" and to explain diplomatically why they chose to enter South Ossetia from Russia. Representatives from the European Commission Mission in Moscow told us August 25 that the EC is trying to get access to South Ossetia through Georgia, not through North Ossetia. An exact death toll figure for civilians and military personnel remained elusive, yet the majority of recent statistics quoted by all sides intimated that initial estimates of South Ossetian casualties were vastly overblown.

BEYRLE